DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 065 002 FL 003 394

AUTHOR Yorke, Harvey F.
TITLE Of Foreign Languages... Some Hints on Do-It-Yourself Public Relations for Teachers.
INSTITUTION Foreign Language Association of Northern California, Inc., Berkeley.
PUB DATE May 72
NOTE 4p.; Speech presented at the Foreign Language Association of Northern California Winter Conference, Modesto, California, February 26, 1972
JOURNAL CIT Northern California Foreign Language Newsletter; v20 n81 p5-8 May 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Communications; *Community Attitudes; Group Dynamics; *Language Programs; Language Teachers; Mass Media; *Public Relations; *School Community Relationship; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Seeking to help language teachers improve their public relations programs, the author analyzes fundamental principles of public relations and communications theory. Discussion centers on group dynamics and communications, differences between public relations and teaching, the importance of the message, and market analysis. Teachers are advised on how to make news and to deal with the media. (RL)

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OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES . . .

SOME HINTS ON DO-IT-YOURSELF PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR TEACHERS

By Harvey F. Yorke
Director of Public Affairs and Communications
San Francisco State College

Presented at the Foreign Language Association of Northern California Winter Conference, Modesto, California, February 26, 1972

When I am invited to talk about public relations and communications, I am reminded of the man who told his audience, "My job is to tell you what I know. Your job is to listen and learn. If you finish your job before I finish mine, please be kind enough to wait until I catch up." I'll try to move along fast enough today to keep pace with your listening and learning abilities.

When your president invited me to speak, I was naturally flattered. Like most people, I enjoy talking about my profession. But like many teachers, an old hand at public relations cannot resist the temptation to stand up and talk when there are people willing to sit and listen.

There may be a public relations asset in this willingness and ability to talk, if used properly. If we are proud of work we do and others are willing to listen to us, it seems smart to take advantage of opportunities. But I would urge caution. Talking is one thing. Delivering a message is another. My first suggestion for *do-it-yourself public relations is to develop a clear and simple message about your profession and its values.* This could be the foundation for all else you do.

Having accepted the invitation to talk today, I began to wonder what I could tell a group of teachers about public relations that you have not already learned, either in the process of becoming teachers, or on the job. Then I realized that one contribution I might make is to help build a bridge that would enable you to transfer some of your teaching skills to practical public relations programs.

Teaching and public relations have much in common. Both are concerned with motivating others to think and act. Both rely on good communications techniques. Both deal in a world of ideas. One of the important points of similarity worth noting is *how we approach the planning task.* When you plan a new academic course, one of the first steps is to establish course goals. Then you find ways to measure progress during the term. And before you enter the classroom, you develop reading lists and plans to use audio-visual aids, guest speakers, field trips, etc. Public relations planning is much the same. We identify goals and try to find ways to measure progress. But instead of reading lists, etc., we try to identify our allies, groups with parallel interests, the opposition or competition, and the range of communications tools available.

Another point of similarity concerns group dynamics and communications. Teachers and people in public relations work with individuals and groups, hoping to stimulate or inspire our audiences in specific ways. We use a variety of communications tools and techniques to get the job done and, hopefully, we begin our jobs with a practical understanding of group dynamics.

However, *there is one feature worth noting because it involves a difference in the way that teachers and public relations people must operate.* Your students are a relatively homogeneous group and you meet them face-to-face at regular intervals. In public relations, our audiences consist of people with many different backgrounds, interests, and motivations. And we rarely meet more than a fraction of the total audience at any given time. That means much of our communicating and persuading must be done indirectly, often through third parties.

One of the major differences between teaching and public relations might be called the mind set, or the frame of reference. The frame of reference for most public relations thinking, planning, and action seems to be the reverse of what we find in other fields and professions. Let me illustrate.

Suppose you want to increase the number of languages offered at your school because knowledge of languages is one of the bases for international communications and understanding. From your perspective this seems like a reasonable proposal and there are all kinds of arguments to support it. You might plan a public relations campaign accordingly, expecting the logic of your arguments to win the case.

But public relations training would cause you to say, "Wait a minute. Let's look at how other groups might view the proposal from their perspective." Here are some of the reactions you might encounter. The isolationist could easily say, "Let the foreigners learn our language." Some types of education fundamentalists might say, "Stick to the three Rs. Foreign language training is a frill. We don't need it." The teach-the-kids-a-trade group might respond, "Foreign language is OK, if we have enough money after we install the new automotive shop and a half dozen other vocational courses."

Understanding other perspectives is only the beginning. If you hope to succeed in public relations, you also have to know how to plan realistically. The essence of successful planning is to discover the thread of common interest between your group and the one you hope to win over to your point of view.

One of the classic cases of finding a thread of common interest and weaving it into a strong rope arose here in California many years ago. A proposal on the ballot would have eliminated featherbedding on railroads—employing people on trains who were no longer needed because of changes in technology. Clem Whitaker, a genius at public relations, was faced with the problem that the majority of the voters neither understood nor cared about the problem. After all, what does it mean to me if the railroad train has a couple of extra people? But he found a connecting link. He used Department of Labor statistics to show how featherbedding in many kinds of business cost the consumer money. House painters using brushes instead of rollers increased the cost about 50%. Bread cost a penny or two more because of featherbedding in bakeries. Theater tickets cost more, etc. etc. The voters approved the anti-featherbedding proposal.

It occurs to me that some of your training as teachers might help you to understand this problem of varying perspectives. *One of the things you have learned is why students respond in different ways to the same set of circumstances.* Some have different backgrounds or experience. Others have emotional or physical problems. But whatever the causes, you are trained to recognize and cope with many of these problems. If, somehow, you transfer that ability to understand students to understanding groups in the community, you will be headed for success.

To work in public relations you need some understanding of public opinion, its nature and how or why it changes. This is a complex subject. I will touch on only a few basic ideas.

We talk about the public as if it were a single entity. Actually, there is no such animal as The Public, except

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statistically. There are many publics and every individual is a member of several. Here in this audience we can identify several publics according to their expected views on a number of topics. There are men and women here. There is a range of ages, educational levels, and professional backgrounds. Some of you are parents, some are homeowners, perhaps some are aviators, and I am sure there are differences in your political philosophies. In a sense, public opinion only counts when it affects what we want to do. And even then, only a segment of the population is involved. Let me give you an example.

I live in Novato, a community of about 30,000 people. But so few vote that about 1,000 can determine the outcome of most elections. So if my project involves public opinion to the extent of a ballot issue, I need to be concerned about those who vote and those who influence the people who vote. Sure simplifies the problem. We should consider another aspect of public opinion if you are concerned with the standing of foreign language training in your community. But again, we need deal with only a fraction of the population. In this instance we care about the thought leaders.

Let me explain a simple theory of communications that you can apply in do-it-yourself public relations. Imagine a set of concentric circles. In the small center circle are the people with original ideas. On a world scale this would be the great thinkers who have sparked major movements. The second circle contains apostles, good thinkers also, but their function in the communications theory is to interpret and expand upon the ideas proposed by the people in the center circle. The third circle is for major communicators. This would include writers of great books, leaders of nations, some generals and religious leaders. They propel ideas, often adding their own interpretations and flavoring. As you approach the outer circles you include more people. But you narrow the scope of influence. Eventually you reach that mass called The Public.

One theory of communications holds that the closer you can get to the center with your ideas, the more people you can influence. Imagine what you might have accomplished if you could have convinced one of the great biblical prophets that the study of foreign languages was the key to international understanding and peace! Well, you can do something akin to that if you can identify the people in your community who occupy the center circle. And if you cannot identify or reach them, go for the apostles and communicators in the other inner circles.

Now let me give you a simple procedure you can follow in do-it-yourself public relations. *First, identify your goals.* What are you trying to accomplish? Like planning a vacation, decide where you want to go before you leave the driveway. You may have short-range and long-range goals. Hopefully they are interrelated. For example, your long-range goal might be expanded language programs in your school. A related short-range goal would be broader understanding and support in the community. Another short-range goal would be understanding and support within the school as a basis for improving your position in the community.

Second, identify target audiences. This is simple with a little practice. Simply list the groups that you must win over to get what you want. Only take the time to be sure your inventory is complete. If you want standing in the community, the key groups might be the social, business, civic and political leadership. But if you want money for programs other groups are your targets, like the school administration and board of trustees. Next you are ready to take several steps simultaneously. One is to study target audiences in some detail so you know the members, leaders, interests, opinions, and possible bases for support. You also want to know who are your allies and, of course, where you might find opposition or competition. Having identified goals, audiences, allies and opposition, the rest should be relatively easy. You are ready to draw up a plan of action.

I have already mentioned the importance of a good, clear message. You may need variations of a basic message for the different groups and situations you will face. Let me give you two examples of messages, both in areas you are familiar with.

Recently I heard a man talking about the problems higher education faces with financial support in the coming decade. He said that the message higher education has been giving the American public for about 25 years, since the end of World War II, is "Come to college and we will assure you a good job and high pay." But when a college degree is no longer a guarantee of either of these, our credibility suffers. The speaker said that we cannot expect the taxpayers, private industry, foundations, and individual donors to support higher education at past levels until we find a new rationale for education and degrees.

The second message may strike closer to home. Have you ever wondered why football has been supported so well for so long in our high schools? Why not other sports, or non-athletic activities? One possible answer is the message. For years the message has been, "Football builds character and teamwork." Maybe so, but I really doubt that the sport had any monopoly on either trait. College football makes money for its school. Professional football is a form of public entertainment. I can understand the popularity of football in these areas. But not in high school if it is at the expense of larger numbers of students interested in music, art, drama—and foreign languages. *But don't criticize football and its supporters. Borrow their ideas. Develop a message. Enlist supporters. Give people reasons to support you.*

Your plan should include action projects, tasks for your allies and supporters and, of course, publicity. If possible, put your plan down in writing—in just a simple statement of your objectives and how you propose to reach them. There is nothing more helpful in a public relations project than a good plan that turns everyone in the same direction and helps people to work together.

I want to suggest some of the action projects you might adopt. Let us suppose that your objective is recognition and respect in the community. How does this come about? One answer is that others—leaders in the community—consider you and what you represent to be one of their number. Or another way to say it, the recognized leadership confers status.

One place you can begin is by explaining your base. Consolidate your existing strength. If you have separate language clubs, keep them, but give all members an additional membership in the school or community Foreign Language Association.

Consider open membership in the Foreign Language Association for anyone who supports your principles and objectives. The Air Force and the Navy have been eminently successful in this area. The Air Force Association and the Navy League have become powerful supporters of air and sea power.

You might consider forming advisory boards. There are campus and community people with interest in your affairs and some standing in the community. I am sure that you would hesitate to invite an advisory board to tell you what and how to teach. But a board must have a mission and what better one than promoting the cultural values of foreign language education?

Move foreign language training from the classroom to the community. This is relatively easy. All it means is that you schedule some of your activities outside the classroom, in the community where others can see what you are doing.

Find ways to move at appropriate levels in the cultural and social arena. For example, work with your advisory board and other supporters toward the time when the Foreign Language Association sponsors some of the major events in the community—like an annual dinner dance, seminars in which noted national and international figures participate, etc. There are ways to make a community foreign language conscious. I am sure you are already doing things in this area. But in case you have overlooked anything, consider using a week each year to display your wares—students demonstrating knowledge, speech and essay contests, dinners with international themes, etc. As part of this movement, try to arrange one date a year when your best foreign language students are recognized by the City Council. During the same week see if it is possible for groups of students to appear at the Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, and other service or professional clubs.

Look for allies and enlist their support. Among the group I think of are foreign born residents of the community, retired people—military and civilian—parents with a special interest in foreign languages or travel, businessmen, educators, etc. Eventually the time comes when you want publicity. This is fun business, if you don't collapse from frustration.

We tend to think of publicity in terms of the three basic news media—newspapers, television, and radio. But you should go farther in your thinking because, within each of these categories, the news outlets vary greatly. The difference between dealing with the San Francisco Examiner and the weekly Novato Advance can be compared to studying French and Portuguese. The Examiner and Advance are newspapers just as French and Portuguese are Romance languages. But there are more dissimilarities in both instances.

Certain rules hold good with all news media. These are few in number but important. Action makes news. People and names make news .Novelty and controversy make news. But today's news is history tomorrow.

You can arrange action to make news, and quite legitimately. Here is an example. Recently, our Dean of Natural Science asked for some publicity help to recruit additional biology students because we will have considerably more room for them when our new building opens. We could have issued a press release saying that San Francisco State College was looking for more biology students. It might have made one of the inside back pages of the newspapers. But instead we created action by having the president of the college write to the president of each community college in the state—and our news story was based on the president's action. We got good play in the newspapers, television, and radio.

There is a difference between people making news and names making news. When we release a story that says something about all science students, or all students, in the School of Education, the newspapers and their readers can visualize all of the people involved. Of course we help with numbers. But it is important to convey your ideas in terms of people being affected, rather than things. Biology students are more interesting than microscopes. Names make stories come to life. Specific individuals

make announcements, comments, claims, or whatever. When dealing with community newspapers names often make the difference. The editors are interested in reporting on the activities of local citizens.

Let me run down the list, very briefly, of all the news outlets you should consider in a publicity program. There are large city daily papers, smaller community dailies, weeklies, neighborhood papers, throwaways, and special interest publications. In television there are local stations with network affiliations and independent local stations. Eventually there will be cable TV stations with a requirement to originate local programming. Some TV stations broadcast up to 1-½ hours of news and others only a half hour. In radio you can find all news stations but many more aimed for specific listeners—rock and roll, youth stations, ethnic stations, classical music stations, and several other varieties.

In the miscellaneous category of news outlets let me mention the wire services—Associated Press and United Press International. Both serve local markets as well as regional, national, and international. There are also feature story syndicates, syndicated columnists, local columnists, newspapers and magazines published by business corporations for internal distribution, professional journals, and, of course, college and university alumni publications.

You have quite an array to choose from. Now the question is how to get your material in print or broadcast. The best advice I can suggest is that you *study the market in your own community.* See what is available and what the ground rules are. I can give you some general rules of procedure. The first is to *observe deadlines.* Nothing is more important. Deadlines control editors.

I remember a small community chamber of commerce complaining that the editor of the local weekly paper wouldn't report board meetings. I checked and discovered a simple fact. The board met on Wednesday night and the editor's deadline was Wednesday morning. If the editor ran a story as a result of a board meeting it was automatically seven or eight days old. When the Chamber of Commerce changed its board meeting nights to Tuesday the problem was solved. Think of your meeting dates in terms of local deadlines.

Second in importance is to give editors and broadcasters news material—according to their definitions, not yours. The San Francisco papers serve readers in nine counties. Any story has to have wide appeal. Local weeklies usually limit their coverage to community events, so the Novato editor would not be interested in this Modesto meeting unless the story featured a Novato resident. Editors don't demand journalistic perfection. All they want is facts, stated briefly and clearly. Tell your story in simple English, with the most important facts—the news—at the very beginning. Type everything, double spaced on one side of the paper.

Get the story to the right person. I remember an organization that wondered why its releases were not being published. The answer was that they addressed everything to the editor and it took a day or two to get through the internal mail department to the city desk. By that time the stories were stale.

Address stories to the city editor at large papers, the editor at small ones, the assignment editor at television stations and the news director at radio stations.

Remember about radio that many stations have facilities for recording interviews over the telephone. This is a quick and easy way to get a story out. All you need to do is telephone the news director and tell him what you have. He will make an immediate decision whether to record an interview, ask you to mail him a story, or forget the whole thing.

Very important. Treat all media alike. Whatever you have, give it to all newspapers, television stations and radio stations at the same time. Don't play favorites. The move will eventually boomerang. The news director at KCBS radio in San Francisco had some advice worth remembering. Norm Woodruff runs a 24-hour news station. He said, ask yourself before you send a story, "Who cares?" If the answer is that a handful of other teachers care, you don't have a story for the news media. But if all students and their parents care about what you are announcing, the media will be interested.

Television demands stories with visual possibilities. Deacon Anderson at Channel 2 in Oakland once said that TV news is not news. It is the portion of the news that is photogenic—if we happened to be there.

Community calendars and public service time are excellent publicity outlets. Many radio stations, TV stations, some newspapers and a few magazines—like Sunset—set aside time or space for announcements about events of community interest, open to the public. Each organization has its own rules about format and deadlines. With most TV and radio stations, they want copy in 100 words or less, two weeks in advance. Sunday papers often want announcements a week or more in advance.

Don't overlook columnists. Remember, columnists must turn out material at a regular rate. Often they search for ideas. If you establish contacts, your story may be just the thing a columnist is looking for when you least expect it. Columnists often like to deal in trends. If I were a foreign language teacher, I might approach several columnists with facts to illustrate trends among students, schools, subjects, etc.

Competition for newspaper space and air time is fierce. To give you an idea, I counted news stories this week. In the Examiner last Thursday there were 74 news stories, not counting sports, business, and society. In our weekly Novato Advance there were 49 stories, not counting society, sports and the editor's column with one paragraph items. On KPIX television that evening there were 14 news stories, not counting weather and sports. An executive of a Los Angeles television station said recently that he could fill two hours of air time every day with just the press conferences called in that city. That is without the station searching out anything on its own or covering action as it occurs in the city.

But no matter how stiff the competition, there is always room for the story that has reader or listener appeal, delivered on time to the right person, in simple English.